

Reaching teens before they drink and kill remains a mission for a local grassroots teen group  
AWARENESS [www.hvnet.com/awareness2](http://www.hvnet.com/awareness2)



Left Becky Shultis, Deandra Shultis Erica Beesmer, Molly Rust, Nate Cayea, Christopher Dennehy, Marie Shultis

KINGSTON - A year ago, an emotional debate raged in the Ulster County Legislature over whether a planned "Social Host" law should include a mandatory 'education component'.

The law was adopted on a 29-2 vote of the county legislature, without the 'education component'.

That didn't stop the teens lead voice for the 'education component', Marie Shultis, a parent, who lost a brother 20 years ago caused by two drunk teens in a different vehicle.

Shultis, and some Onteora High School teens,(not affiliated with the High School) have organized two programs. One is the AWARENESS Mentoring program, intended as an outreach to younger children.

The other is the AWARENESS Alcohol Program, in its second year, and born out of a tragic drunk driving death on Prom Night 2007. The incident happened in a vehicle driven by Zephyr Dresser-Peck, currently in state prison serving a 1 1/2 to 4 1/2 year sentence.

AWARENESS Teen Administrator, Stephan Bielecki and Coordinator Rose Hallinan spearheaded the creation of the AWARENESS Alcohol Program after reaching out to Dresser - Peck. They were both honored with a Congressional Award from Congressman Maurice Hinchey and NYS Assemblyman Kevin Cahill in August 2008 for outstanding community service for their part in creating the programs.

Dresser-Peck is a “Coordinator” for the Alcohol Awareness Program. A year ago, the parents of the deceased voiced outrage that the person responsible for their son’s death was part of an outreach. Shultis said, at the time, that Dresser-Peck is not being used as a “role model”, but as an example of how bad decisions can lead to tragic life altering consequences.



Davenport, left, and Town of Ulster Magistrate Susan Kesick share why it is important

Shultis is trying to educate more people in law enforcement to get them signed on to what she is doing, she does have one key group in her corner, some local magistrates, who hand down the sentences. “Anybody we can reach makes it worth it,” said Town of Marbletown Justice Claudia Davenport. “It is something that I’ve started sentencing people to because I believe in the program and I think that it works.”

A presentation was held last Friday January 16th at the Ulster County Law Enforcement Center that was well attended by Ulster County Magistrates and law enforcement. Speakers included The Teen Administrator, Stephan Bielecki, Ulster County Deputy Executive Director, Suzanne Holt from County Executive Mike Heins office,

Kelly Flynn of Assemblyman Cahill's office shared her personal experience of being hit by a drunk driver last year, “I wish the person that hit me had this program to be sentenced to when he received his first ticket.”

Robert Benedetto of the New York State Liquor Authority stated the need for change in the way society views underage drinking, more like the way one would view rape or robbery as a crime. Judge Robert Vosper, Rosendale Town Justice and current Chair of the UC Substance Abuse Prevention Board, commented on the need for the teen program. Ulster County Legislator Jeannette Provenzano and many others involved in law enforcement were in attendance. Shultis recounted how the programs evolved out of an underage drinking party, at her home, in August 2006.

“The night of the party, we instructed the troopers to block the driveway and call the parents to pick their children up. Many were not happy, one to the point of pulling his ID in the trooper’s face and telling him that he was an attorney, and he knew the laws, and ‘you can’t do this to these kids’. This led me to reach out to the teens and ask them to help break the underage drinking cycle. That’s when the mentoring program was developed.”

The AWARENESS Mentoring program is now in its' third year and has 12 of the teens who started in the program as 7th grade students. These students trained 9th grade Mentors this year. That is the same number of 7th graders which means they all became Mentors.

"Teens see a need for this", said Shultis.

The Alcohol Program came a year later.

"We have a working model that has already proven it gets through to teens", notes Shultis.

Part of that is a video, produced by the teens, who in one part, role play. The other segment is an interview with Dresser-Peck:



Shulte: "it makes everything real"

That's what got through to Laura Shulte, now a student at Ulster County Community College. Schulte was arrested twice, on alcohol-related offences. After the second offence, she was ordered to the Alcohol Awareness Program. That, she said, is when the denial finally stopped.

"You know, you don't realize how much it affects you. To see his interview ... to see Zephyr's interview ... is just beyond me, because it makes everything real; to see the actual person in front of you who is in jail because he killed his own friend has the biggest impact ."

Shultis said the success of this program will rely on law enforcement writing tickets for underage substance use, as well as the Social Host Law so that the teens can get sentenced by the Judge to attend the program.

It will be funded by the participants allowing for them to receive an education taught by the teens who are overseen by Christopher Dennehy, OASAS certified, and the AWARENESS Alcohol Program Clinical Supervisor. "They will be educated in a proactive way to help to save lives", said Shultis